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SPECIAL REPORT

This famous photo was initially used by the Wiesenthal Center as part of their stationery but was dropped after complaints from survivors.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center: State-of-the-art Activism Or Hollywood Hype?

BY GARY ROSENBLATT
Editor

Hier, not Wiesenthal, is the operative name at the nation's most influential Holocaust center, where Rabbi Marvin Hier raises a great deal of money, publicity and controversy.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center, the nation's largest institution devoted to the study of the Holocaust, is essentially the fulfillment of one man's vision, reflecting his personality and style in keeping alive memories of the Holocaust and combatting anti-Semitism today.

But that man is not Simon Wiesenthal. The famed Nazi hunter and advocate of justice has given the Los Angeles-based Center his name, and with it, recognition and stature. The man who has given the Center form and substance, though, is a 50-year-old Orthodox rabbi from New York named Marvin Hier.

To understand the Wiesenthal Center one must first understand Rabbi Hier, a man who, supporters and critics agree, is a genius at what he does. He has an uncanny ability to accomplish his dreams, to inspire people, to attract publicity for his cause, to raise a great deal of funds — and a great deal of controversy.

Admirers point to Rabbi Hier's long list of accomplishments at the Wiesenthal Center. In less than seven years of existence it has received contributions from well over 200,000 regular donors, many of whom have never given money to Jewish causes, making it one of the largest Jewish organizations in the world. The current facility includes a museum, library and research facilities. An ambitious expansion program has just been launched which, at a cost of $30 million, will nearly quadruple its size. The new site will feature a much-enlarged Holocaust museum, a 500-seat lecture hall, a film and video production studio, a large film vault, a 5,000-volume research library, and classrooms and offices for use by Yeshiva University of Los Angeles, which is affiliated with the Center, and the Center itself.

More than its physical growth, though, the Center has made an international reputation for itself through its museum, its Academy Award-winning documentary on the Holocaust, entitled "Genocide," and its increasing involvement as a watchdog against current anti-Semitism in the U.S. and around the world.

Among its social activities, the Wiesenthal Center led the boycott against CBS-TV for allowing pro-PLO actress Vanessa Redgrave to portray a Holocaust heroine in "Playing For Time;" it spearheaded the national campaign against the Statute of Limitations on Nazi war crimes; and it brought international attention to the case of Raoul Wallenberg, leading to honorary U.S. citizenship for the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Jewish lives during World War II.

The Wiesenthal Center has also published a book of 50 articles by leading Holocaust scholars as a companion to "Genocide," produces a weekly radio news program, started a videotape record of Holocaust survivors, and has recently published volume one of a proposed annual book of scholarly discussion of the Holocaust.

Critics, however, say that for all of its successes, the Wiesenthal Center lacks substance. They charge that it is more concerned with raising money than putting it to good use. They point to the fact that it has evolved from "The Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies" to simply "The Simon Wiesenthal Center" as proof that it has broadened its scope and now concentrates more on attracting publicity and media attention than producing research and scholarship. (In truth, the Wiesenthal Center has avoided specific definitions of its functions and goals, characterizing itself as "the largest institution of its kind in North America.")

The Wiesenthal Center has been a sacrosanct institu-

A framed photo of Simon Wiesenthal hangs in the office of Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder and dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center of Los Angeles.

Exclusive photos for the JEWISH TIMES by Bill Aron.

The Wiesenthal Center Museum features a montage depicting Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill and Pope Pius XII as "the bystanders."

tion in the Jewish community; it is named after an authentic modern hero and deals with the sacred topic of Holocaust education. "To *amcha* (the Jewish masses), the Center is *kedusha* (holy)," said one West Coast rabbi, "but there is a growing amount of murmuring among the Jewish elite — the professionals and the scholars." They feel the Center has lost its original purpose as a research institution, that its financial success has far outdistanced its programs, and that its Holocaust-related activities are a means of attracting support for the yeshiva it sponsors. They view the Center as an extension of Rabbi Hier — "slick, aggressive and full of hype," in the words of one national Jewish leader.

Holocaust survivors and scholars say he has cheapened and exploited the tragedy through his fund-raising techniques; local and national Jewish organizations feel he has moved in on their turf, isolating himself and the Center from the rest of the community; and community relations professionals charge that he has deliberately overdramatized anti-Semitic incidents, fueling fear and paranoia among many Jews.

"The over-riding message of The Simon Wiesenthal Center seems to be: it *can* happen again," says Rabbi Harold Schulweis, who heads a large Conservative congregation in Los Angeles. "They point up only the dangers and try to scare people."

Says a spokesman for the Center: "Controlled hysteria is sometimes necessary as a marketing technique."

Martin Mendelsohn, the former head of the Special Litigation Unit of Nazi War Criminals for the U.S. Department of Justice who is now Counsel to the Wiesenthal Center, smiles when he hears the accusations against Rabbi Hier and the Center. "Let's face it," he says, "the critics resent him because he's Orthodox, he's aggressive, and most of all because he's so successful. The establishment organizations *shrei gevalt,* raise money and do nothing. They *re*-act to events. The Center *acts,* quickly and effectively.

"The reality is that you can't be effective in the Jewish world without stepping on some toes."

Does the end justify the means? For years the debates have swirled in the Jewish community on the meaning and demeaning of the Holocaust, on whether Jewish organizations have "used" the Holocaust to raise funds.

This report, based on a visit to the Wiesenthal Center and interviews with more than three dozen people, focuses on what the Center does, how and why it does it, and why this institution has been both praised and condemned for the way it deals with the Holocaust — an examination into what inspires us, and at what price.

A Hollywood Success Story

"I was intrigued by Los Angeles. My dream was to build a yeshiva there."

Rabbi Hier

The Simon Wiesenthal Center is, literally and figuratively, a Hollywood success story. Located on West Pico Boulevard in the heart of one of the major Jewish areas of Los Angeles, it blends Jewish activism and showbiz glitz in a way no other Jewish institution could, or would. A recent gala 75th birthday party for Simon Wiesenthal at the Century Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles was described by the Center as "a star-studded dinner" for 1,500 chaired by Elizabeth Taylor and featuring a musical tribute to Wiesenthal by pop singer Barry Manilow. Other entertainment figures on hand included Red Buttons, Ed Asner, Jayne Meadows, Leonard Nimoy and Suzanne Somers. Personal greetings were sent by President Reagan, Israel President Chaim Herzog, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Frank Sinatra.

The intermediary between world and Jewish leaders and the entertainment industry is Rabbi Hier, who seems as comfortable chatting with a movie star as he does discussing a point of Talmud. It was Rabbi Hier who recognized the impact of mass media on Jewish causes and who sensed the potential for a major Jewish center in southern California at a time when the East Coast, and specifically New York, was considered the only logical place to base a national Jewish organization.

Marvin Hier is a curious blend of Lower East Side street smarts and Hollywood sophistication, a fact underscored by his office at the Wiesenthal Center. On display are his 1962 Orthodox rabbinical ordination from Rabbi Jacob Joseph, a yeshiva on the Lower East Side of New York, as

"They point up only the dangers and try to scare people," says a critic of the Center. But a Center official counters: "Controlled hysteria is sometimes necessary as a marketing technique."

well as the glass-encased Academy Award he received for co-producing "Genocide," voted the Best Documentary Feature at the 1982 ceremonies — surely the first rabbi to win an Oscar.

"Marvin is half yeshiva, half Disneyland," says one admirer. "He's fascinated with pinball machines and he reminds me of a human pinball, careening from one extreme to the other with lights flashing and bells ringing."

An intense, sharp-featured man, Rabbi Hier is, in manner and style, pure New York. He is quick-tongued, disarmingly forthright and outspoken. (Of the many people interviewed for this article, he was the only one whose every comment was "on the record.")

Rabbi Hier feels he has nothing to hide. He has accomplished a great deal in a short time, far beyond even his own fertile imagination, and he is proud of what he has done. He is aware of it all, the praise from world figures and the criticism from Jewish professionals and academics — much of it muted and behind his back. He is, he says, a man of action and he does not worry about his critics. "They're jealous," he says. "We're Orthodox, we're mavericks and we're successful."

The multi-million dollar Wiesenthal Center began as a modest plan for a yeshiva in Los Angeles. Rabbi Hier was in Israel with his family in 1976, on sabbatical from his Orthodox pulpit in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he had served for 16 years. He was growing bored with the rabbinate, and wanted to become more involved in education. "I was intrigued by Los Angeles," he recalled. "Such a large, wealthy Jewish community but a place where Orthodox Judaism hadn't come of age, hadn't even scratched the surface. My dream was to build a yeshiva there."

Not that his would be the first. Yeshiva University, the New York-based Orthodox institution, had launched a West Coast branch, based in Los Angeles, but it failed. "An L.A. institution couldn't be run from New York," Rabbi Hier concluded.

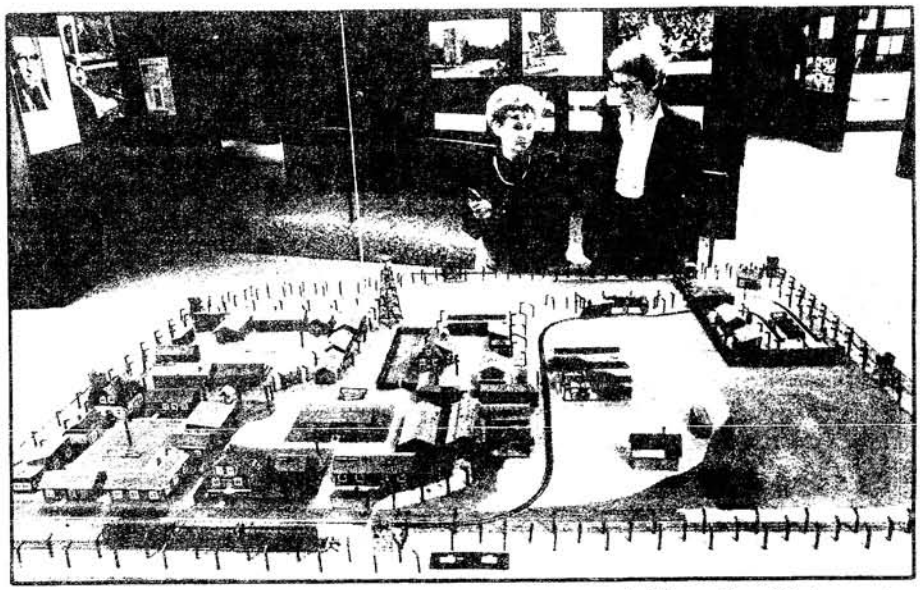
Upon his return to Vancouver, he won the financial support of his most illustrious congregant, Samuel Belzberg, who along with his brothers heads up major financial corporations in Vancouver and Beverly Hills, making them one of the wealthiest Jewish families in North America.

Samuel Belzberg gave Rabbi Hier $500,000 and told him to go to Los Angeles and buy a piece of property for his proposed yeshiva. "I was a complete novice," says Rabbi Hier. "I'd never even been involved in buying my own house." But within 10 days he had visited Los Angeles and put $200,000 down on a $900,000 vacant building which is now the site of the Wiesenthal Center complex.

He planned to open a high school as well as post-high school yeshiva program for students who would divide their time between Talmud classes and college studies at one of several local universities.

Rabbi Hier met with Dr. Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University in New York, and worked out an arrangement whereby the new Los Angeles institution would be called Yeshiva University of Los Angeles (YULA) but would be financially independent. "The only affiliation is educational," explains Rabbi Hier, "in accordance with the Yeshiva University motto of Torah U'Madah (or Torah and secular studies). But there are no financial ties and we have our own board of trustees."

YULA opened in the fall of 1977 with 20 post-high school yeshiva students. Seven years later there were some 240 high school students, 65 post-high school students and an outreach program that had an impact on thousands of people.



The other Holocaust museum in Los Angeles, known as the Martyrs Memorial and Museum, was founded by survivors and is located on the top floor of the Federation building.

An Unlikely Marriage In Vienna

"Simon wanted a vibrant center. He wanted action. So did we."

Rabbi Hier

The concept of a Holocaust museum came to Rabbi Hier, he says, in August, 1977, just before his new school opened. "I was having my Shabos chulent (a meat stew) and telling a friend at the dinner table what a shame it is that there is no equivalent of a Yad Vashem (Israel's National Holocaust Museum) in the United States. I realized that it will never happen unless we do it ourselves. I decided, let's do it, and then worry about the criticism."

Four days later Rabbi Hier was on a plane to Vienna along with Samuel Belzberg's wife, Frances, and Roland Arnell, an early supporter, to meet with Simon Wiesenthal and propose the concept of a Holocaust center to be named after the famed Nazi hunter. Rabbi Hier had met Wiesenthal twice before in Vienna during visits the rabbi had made to Nazi concentration camp sites. He felt that Wiesenthal had the stature to give his proposed center the influence and respect it needed.

Wiesenthal thought the Americans had come to offer him an honorary degree. "We ended up talking for four straight days," Rabbi Hier said. "Simon told us his sad tale of how since 1946 he had hoped to create a Holocaust institute in the United States. He was insistent that any institution to which he lent his name would have to be 'more than just photos on a wall — walls as silent as graves,' " Rabbi Hier recalled. "Simon told us that too many institutions collected Holocaust information and then, in his words, 'put it in the freezer.' He wanted a vibrant center, not afraid to speak out on current issues. He wasn't worried about the Jewish establishment or quiet diplomacy. He wanted action. So did we."

And so an unlikely marriage was made in Vienna between Simon Wiesenthal, a secular, non-Zionist Jew who devoted his life to the pursuit of Nazi criminals, and Marvin Hier, an Orthodox Zionist who had spent his career as a pulpit rabbi.

Wiesenthal agreed to lend his name and expertise to the new center and to donate his vast collection of Nazi-hunting files to the center upon his death. Rabbi Hier

Simon Wiesenthal and Elizabeth Taylor at a Wiesenthal Center event. The institution has been criticized for using Hollywood film stars to promote its activities.

agreed to make the center the social action institution Wiesenthal envisioned and to contribute at least $5,000 a month to Wiesenthal's Documentation Center in Vienna for his ongoing help.

One key difference remained: Wiesenthal was and remains a universalist on the Holocaust. He prefers to speak of the 11 million people of all faiths killed by the Nazis rather than the six million Jews who perished.

Many Jews, especially survivors, are infurated with this thinking. They argue that unlike the others who died, the Jews alone were singled out for total annihilation and were not simply victims of war."He alienates all of the Jewish survivors," says Elie Wiesel of Wiesenthal's views.

Dr. Alex Grobman, former director of the Wiesenthal Center and a Holocaust expert, said that Wiesenthal made "a colossal blunder" in referring to 11 million victims. "His motives were understandable," Grobman said. "He felt that few people care about the Jews, and he could broaden interest in the cause if he included the Christians. But first of all, 11 million is an arbitrary number. And more importantly, it distorts history and de-emphasizes the very crucial difference between the Jews and the other victims."

Dr. Yehuda Bauer discussed the matter in a 1980 article in *Midstream*. The professor of Holocaust Studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem said that Simon Wiesenthal "invented the '11 million' formula that is a key slogan in the denial of the uniqueness of the Jewish experience." He said that the number "in purely historical terms is sheer nonsense" because Wiesenthal's figure is either much too high (about 500,000 non-Jews died in concentration camps) or much too low (about 20 million non-Jewish civilians died at the hands of the Nazis during the war).

"His mistake is not arithmetical, but conceptual," wrote Bauer of Wiesenthal. "Basic to it is the lack of comprehension for what one might call the gradation of evil." Bauer argued that this universal approach threatens to de-Judaize and dissipate the meaning and impact of the Holocaust.

The inscription at the entrance of the Wiesenthal Center Holocaust Museum pays tribute to "six million Jews and to five million of other faiths," but the Center, in its printed material, now refers to six million Jews "and millions of others."

The museum itself opened in 1978 on the lower level of the Center, which also houses YULA and a Holocaust library. It is small and crowded with photos and multimedia images. Just inside the entrance are drawings made by Wiesenthal when he was a Nazi prisoner, including a sketch of a guard tower with walls formed of human skulls. Next to the entrance a 25-minute film is shown relating the Holocaust to current events, especially anti-Semitic incidents. It is updated every six weeks.

Along one wall are displays about the roots of anti-Semitism and the Jewish resistance movements, both armed and spiritual. There is a pictorial chronology of the Holocaust and facts and figures on the destruction of European Jewry. The one-room museum includes a scale model of a concentration camp, audio-visual recordings about Nazi brutality and a display containing photos of Nazi leaders.

Hanging from the ceiling and covering the walls are photos of Jews being herded into concentration camps. There are also artifacts like a burnt Torah and a pair of tefillen found at Auschwitz.

In a far corner of the room is a photo montage wall display. It shows concentration camp inmates pointing an accusing finger, with the inscription: "Here is the world that didn't care, those that had ears but would not hear, eyes but would not see, hands but would not act, and the few saints amongst them who cared, who bled, who suffered." Raoul Wallenberg is shown as one of those saints; Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill and Pope Pius XII are depicted as "the bystanders."

Outside, adjacent to the one-room museum is a Holocaust Memorial Plaza with six black majestic sculptures, each symbolically shattered at the top, and a marble slab inscribed with the names of concentration camps. A flame burns in honor of the victims.

The outside plaza offers a quiet spot to reflect on the exhibit's powerful and disturbing visuals. It is here, away from the intensity, that the overwhelming sadness sinks in.

Two Holocaust Museums, Two Miles Apart

"One day your children will mark this historic date: namely, the decision of the Jewish people of Los Angeles to erect a memorial to our martyrs."

Simon Wiesenthal
June, 1973

Ironically, while there are only a handful of Holocaust museums in the United States, there is another one in Los Angeles, only a few minutes' ride from the Wiesenthal Center.

The Martyrs Memorial and Museum of the Holocaust is housed in and affiliated with the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles. The two museums opened within a few

months of each other and though officials of each publicly deny it, there is still resentment between the supporters of each institution. Simon Wiesenthal had a role to play in the development of both museums and that is the core of the controversy.

Here is what happened: more than a dozen different Holocaust survivors groups in the Los Angeles area had tried to build a memorial of some kind since 1962. The Federation agreed to help coordinate the work, to provide space, staff and advice, but the fund-raising was to be done by the survivors groups. Over the years there was much talk but little progress.

Eventually a plan was agreed on to have a museum built adjacent to the Federation building. When the Federation moved to a 12-story building on a site with no useable land, though, the new proposal was to allocate the top floor of the building for the project.

A fund-raising dinner was held in June,1973, and the guest speaker was Simon Wiesenthal who told the crowd: "One day your children will mark this historical date: namely, the decision of the Jewish people of Los Angeles to erect a memorial to our martyrs."

The proposal moved ahead slowly over the next several years and a major fund-raising event was scheduled with Wiesenthal again invited to be the guest of honor. He accepted, but shortly before the event he cancelled abruptly and the dinner was called off.

The survivors groups learned that, after agreeing to appear, Wiesenthal had met with Rabbi Hier in Vienna and pledged to help establish a center in his name in Los Angeles, so he withdrew from the other commitment.

The surviors groups were furious. "We felt like we had the rug pulled out from under us," one leader recalled. "This project had been in the works for years and years and was finally coming towards completion. And then we find out that Wiesenthal is going to help start another museum a couple of miles away. We felt we had been sold out — that he was a carpetbagger."

The Federation set up meetings between the new Wiesenthal Center group and the Federation-affiliated survivors groups. There was some attempt at merging the two museum projects but that was unsuccessful. There was even talk of a lawsuit. In the end, the Wiesenthal group agreed to donate $25,000 to the local museum project to compensate for any monies lost by the cancelled dinner and to help ease the tensions between them. But the bitter feelings remain.

Simon Wiesenthal had a role to play in the development of both Los Angeles-based Holocaust museums and that is the core of the bitterness between them.

"We shouldn't have taken the Wiesenthal people's money and allowed them to buy us off," says Anna Fischer, a survivor whose husband designed the Martyrs Memorial and Museum.

Ethel Lozabnick, chairman of the Martyrs Museum, stressed that it represents the entire Jewish community (some feel the Wiesenthal museum represents only the Orthodox) and is the official West Coast representative of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. She said the museum attracts more than 100,000 people a year, more than half of them school children. The museum has its own curriculum,its own tours given by survivors, its own extensive outreach program, and a visiting director from Yad Vashem. She denies any competition between the two museums. "I wish there were *ten* such memorials in this city," she said, "because the point is to make people aware. People ask why does Los Angeles need two museums devoted to the Holocaust and we say, 'how many synagogues does your city have?' "

But moments later she noted that the Wiesenthal Center museum is "too flashy, too noisy — we have a certain serenity here."

The Martyrs Museum does have a quiet dignity. The room has photos, documents, figures and maps depicting the Holocaust, as well as a commemorative crypt with a suspended gravestone. The most dramatic features of the room are a small sanctuary area and a simulated transport boxcar that serves as an exit. The passage is dark, except for a yellow light behind the slats on the walls which display the names of once-flourishing Jewish communities in Europe. Under foot one hears the metallic clanking of the train and envisions the horror of Jews crammed into cattle cars.

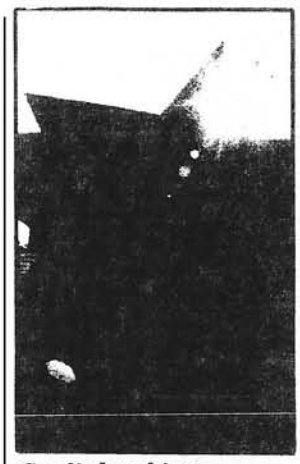
After visiting both museums (one a bit more strident in tone, one a bit quieter), a visitor is struck more by their similarities than their differences. Both museums leave the visitor with an understanding of the facts of the Holocaust and a gnawing sense of unfathomable loss.

"It's a shame there are two museums here," says Nathan Gierowitz, a survivor who is active in Federation. "Each costs money, and many survivors feel as I do that such a split is unhealthy." He blames the Federation for dragging its feet for years on the community museum and putting the financial burden on the survivors themselves. But he faults the Wiesenthal Center for its "Hollywood style."

Based on interviews with a number of survivors in Los Angeles, is seems clear that the majority of them are less than sympathetic to the Wiesenthal Center. In part there is the bad blood over the initial competition between the two museums, and then there is Wiesenthal's universalist views on the 11 million rather than the six million. But there is also the question of approach, which many feel is demeaning to the Holocaust. They cite the Center's use of entertainment industry stars to promote its cause, its direct mail letters which emphasize the dangers of current anti-Semitism in this country and, critics say, trivializes the Holocaust.

Ethel Lozabnick of the Martyrs Museum says her only quarrel with the Wiesenthal Center is that "they don't work together with us. If you love a community, you should be a part of that community."

That complaint is heard often about Rabbi Hier and the Wiesenthal Center which, for example, has its own Yom Hashoah service each year on Holocaust Memorial Day in addition to the organized Los Angeles Jewish communi-



Sunlight shines through the Wiesenthal Center's Memorial Plaza.

The Academy Award for "Genocide," cited as Best Documentary, is displayed in a glass case in Rabbi Hier's office.

ty observance. There are many other instances of alleged competition.

A former staffer in the public relations department of the Federation recalled how, when Avital Shcharansky was visiting Los Angeles several years ago on behalf of her husband, Anatoly, the imprisoned Soviet Jewish refusenik, the local Jewish community relations council had planned an outdoor demonstration to dramatize his plight. "We had lined up Mayor Bradley, Charlton Heston and others and we wanted Gov. Jerry Brown," the former staffer said. "But the Wiesenthal Center got a hold of Gov. Brown and scheduled a press conference of their own with him and Avital an hour before our demonstration. We would have been glad to cooperate but they tried to co-opt our effort."

Similarly, a Federation official angrily recalled how, during a Federation mission to Israel and Vienna a few years ago, Rabbi Hier "influenced some of our people and persuaded them to contribute more to the Wiesenthal Center than to Federation. We were livid."

There is an inherent competition between the Center and Federation for major contributors and though many leaders of the Federation feel that the Center is more show than substance, they are loathe to say so publicly.

"Our biggest contributors are also major contributors to the Wiesenthal Center so we would look like we are trying to denigrate our competition," one Federation official said. "But the truth is that we feel the Center is very fuzzy in terms of its real purpose and really not accountable to anyone. They just don't operate like any other major Jewish organization."

The Swastika Incident

"We see the glass of anti-Semitism as half full."

Martin Mendelsohn

A basic, underlying difference between the Wiesenthal Center and other major Jewish groups is in their response to perceived anti-Semitism. Marty Mendelsohn, counsel to the Center, puts it this way: "We see the glass of anti-Semitism as half full, and they see it as half empty -- and sometimes they don't see the glass at all."

One particular incident points out these differences in style, method and approach. Sometime during the night of January 7, 1981, the walls of the Wiesenthal Center were painted with swastikas and anti-Semitic slogans in German and English. Rabbi Hier held a press conference that morning and said he was certain that "this work was not done by a rowdy gang trying to be mischievous." He said it may be related to two German-speaking men who visited the Center a few days earlier wearing military haircuts, heavy boots and Nazi insignias.

"What starts with a can of spray paint never ends there," Rabbi Hier told the press conference. "History has taught us that seemingly minor incidents such as these eventually lead to violence."

He announced that Simon Wiesenthal would fly in from his home in Vienna for a rally at the Center at which time the graffiti would be painted over.

The rally was held about two weeks later and drew more than 2,000 people, including a number of prominent political leaders. Wiesenthal spoke out against the Institute for Historical Review, a California-based extremist organization that claims the Holocaust never happened. He then watched as the graffiti was painted over.

The Jewish Federation did not send a representative to the rally because "it was viewed by many as an exploitation," said Murray Wood, executive director of the Jewish

A Powerful Assault On The Heart And The Mind

"Genocide," the Academy Award-winning documentary on the Holocaust, is the single greatest success of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Like the Center itself, it is slick, emotional, powerfully effective — and controversial.

Some three years in the making at a cost of $3 million, the 85 minute film was produced by the Center in the hope that it would establish the institute's reputation as well as become the centerpiece of Holocaust education programs and receive a worldwide audience. "Rabbi Hier put all of his eggs in one basket, pouring a great deal of money into this one project," said a member of the staff of the Wiesenthal Center. "But he was right. It paid off."

The film was co-produced by Arnold Schwartzmann, a director and graphics designer, and Rabbi Hier, who wrote the script with Martin Gilbert, an Oxford University historian.

The film was premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington in January, 1982, and was hailed as "unforgettable." The unique multi-image documentary — using split screens and double images — combines historical narrative with actual stories of ordinary people caught up in the Nazi reign of terror. Orson Welles and Elizabeth Taylor narrate the film, having donated their services gratis.

"Genocide" is aimed at giving the Holocaust emotional resonance to a generation unaware of its horrors. "Sixty percent of the world's population was born after the Holocaust, and young people are not historians," said Rabbi Hier. "This is the generation of The Tube. We wanted to present a film in a form young people can relate to. They don't relate to events unless there are people involved they can identify with."

The film succeeds in offering a sense of immediacy and drama missing from most educational films. It is, above all, a powerful assault on the mind and the heart. Professionally slick, it features split screen techniques, narration by Welles and Taylor, a musical score by Academy Award-

winner Elmer Bernstein, and use of top Hollywood talents throughout, from direction and script to sound and graphics. Some of its most moving moments occur when the documentary focuses on the personal stories of ordinary people like Leon Kahn, a survivor who now lives in Vancouver. He and other members of his family joined the partisans but his mother, refusing to leave her mother, chose to remain behind. His description of their parting lingers in the mind.

Another memorable sequence relates how a group of Orthodox Jews in the town of Lublin defied the Nazis when, commanded to sing a song, they sang and danced with fervor to the Yiddish words, "we shall outlive them."

The documentary opens with scenes of pre-World War II Europe, depicting the richness of the culture, the strength of family life and the depth of religious commitment. It traces Hitler's rise to power, the growing anti-Semitism and the full scale Nazi effort to annihilate Jews.

Film clips, still photos, illustrations and the expert narration keep the film moving, with virtually all of the major issues raised by the Holocaust at least touched on.

The film answers the charge that Jews went to their deaths like sheep to slaughter, pointing out the countless instances of physical and spiritual resistance. It notes the apathy of the Church — pointedly referring to Pope Pius XII — and the fact that the U.S. failed to open its gates to refugees before the war or bomb the concentration camps during the war.

The film states that Jews were not the only victims of the Nazis but emphasizes that "the full fury focused on Jews alone" and that the Nazi target was "not just Jewish lives but Jewish life."

The film closes with Simon Wiesenthal at the Western Wall in Jerusalem placing a *kvittel*, or message, between its cracks: "I am my brother's keeper," he says.

Perhaps the strongest message comes after the film is over, after the credits have run. In silence, three graphics are flashed on the black screen, one at a time. They note that anti-Semitic candidates ran well in two statewide elections in recent years, and that a 1981 survey in West Germany found that 18 percent of the respondents said life was "better under Hitler." The final, unspoken but implicit massage: it *can* happen again.

Stephen Hunter, the Baltimore Morning Sun film critic, said he was "powerfully put off by the slickness" of the film, which, he wrote, at times seemed to be "a guided tour of the Holocaust courtesy of a very peppy advertising agency." The effect was "unsettling, even offensive," but "so scorching that it transcends technique in the end. It becomes almost unbearably moving."

The film is "more emotional and manipulative than technical and scholarly in its approach," said Hunter, but the point is to present "a cry, a scream of rage and bitterness, not a dry footnote in an unread, 800-page book."

One expert consultant to "Genocide" said he was concerned at "a few glaring historical inaccuracies" in the film, which Rabbi Hier chose to leave in because of their emotional appeal. One was the incident of the Bais Yaakov girls who committed suicide rather than be captured by the Nazis. Most historians say this never took place.

But another Holocaust scholar defended the film: "It wasn't intended as a work of scholarship, but to move people. And it does."

Ironically, due to distribution rights and other problems, the film has never received a sustained wide-scale showing. Typically, it is used as Wiesenthal Center benefit screening in a major city where it will be shown for one or two nights, playing to primarily Jewish audiences rather than the uneducated masses it was intended for. It has been shown in about 30 U.S. cities, but the Center plans to have the film translated into many languages and shown around the world.

Like the Wisenthal Center itself, "Genocide," the Academy Award-winning documenttary, is slick, emotional and powerfully effective.

This graffiti was scrawled on the Wiesenthal Center's walls, leading to a large rally at the Center that some Jewish organizational officials called exploitive.

Community Relations Council. The Center overreacted to the vandalism, he added, because "I think some organizations stand to benefit in terms of their ability to raise funds, in terms of proving their necessity to exist." He said Rabbi Hier "played into the hands of our enemies by giving them a million dollars worth of free publicity."

The classic Jewish establishment response to anti-Semites is to quarantine them when they want attention and spotlight them when they don't. Community relations officials say that most swastika-painting incidents are done by minors as a manifestation of imitative behavior; the more attention they are given the more times such incidents will occur. "The Wiesenthal Center people probably called the media before they called the police," said Wood. He added that while the Center has an expertise in promoting an understanding of the Holocaust era, "in terms of contemporary anti-Semitism they are amateurs."

Another critic of the rally was Deborah Lipstadt, professor of Jewish studies at UCLA, who said that "making a big media hype"out of the graffiti incident was "not fighting anti-Semitism but only self-serving an institution."

Responding to charges that he left the graffiti on the Center's walls for two weeks to attract media attention and ensure a large rally, Rabbi Hier said that the decision was Wiesenthal's. "He said for us to leave it up, to prove to the Jews of Beverly Hills, who might think that they are beyond hatred, that anti-Semitism is still alive." Rabbi Hier wondered if those who criticized the rally weren't guilty of "sour grapes" over the Center's highly visible reaction to vandalism.

Wiesenthal himself later assailed the leaders of the organized Jewish community of Los Angeles for what he saw as their failure to respond forcefully to a rising number of anti-Semitic incidents. "The Jewish Federation of Los Angeles wanted to keep it quiet," he said of the graffiti incident. "This kind of response on the part of the Los Angeles Federation reminds me of the situation in Germany in the 1920s and 30s when the Nazis spit in our face, and the Jews would say, 'what a nice rain.'"

'A New Wave of Anti-Semitism'

Do we need another Jewish defense agency?

Many community leaders and Jewish professionals around the country are concerned that the Wiesenthal Center appears to have evolved from what they thought it would be, a Holocaust-related research institution, into another Jewish defense agency, competing with — and, critics say, duplicating the work of — organizations like the Anti-Defamation League of Bnai Brith.

A case in point is a widely circulated mass mailing that has been sent out to hundreds of thousands of American Jews over the last year, soliciting funds for the Wiesenthal Center to launch a new Nazi-Watch Program.

The six-page letter, under the signature of Wiesenthal Center counsel Martin Mendelsohn, claims that "a new wave of anti-Semitism is sweeping Europe" and it "is being fueled by Americans who are supplying both leadership and materials to rebuild Nazism in Europe."

The letter goes on to cite a number of specific anti-Semitic incidents in Europe and in the U.S., from synagogue bombings to "scholarly" articles purporting the Holocaust never happened. According to the letter, "the new surge of anti-Semitism here is connected to the rise of anti-Semitism abroad. And these are not just a series of isolated, random events. We have learned the rise of anti-Semitism is spear-headed by networks of neo-Nazis which reach all over the country. INDEED, ALL OVER THE WORLD!"

Later, it states: "That same intense, U.S.-originated hatred that feeds these Nazi groups in Europe also sparks neo-Nazis in the United States. Hatred and anti-Semitism are shockingly on the rise here, being boldly scrawled across our entire nation, threatening all that we hold dear."

Critics maintain that the letter is long on shock value but short on fact, that it links disparate events occurring over a period of several years and that were exposed at the time by existing national Jewish defense agencies. These critics say the letter deliberately exaggerates anti-Semitic activity.

Specifically, some observers contend that the number and influence of neo-Nazi groups in the U.S. is quite small and that they often compete with each other rather than forming "networks of neo-Nazis," as the letter states. Further, these groups are neither "strong" nor "well financed" as they are described in the letter. The assertion that "hatred and anti-Semitism are shockingly on the rise" in the U.S., "threatening all we hold dear," is not based on any meaningful criteria, critics charge. And the phrase "scrawled across the nation," referring to anti-Semitism vandalism, goes against the statistical evidence compiled by national Jewish agencies which shows a steady decline over the last several years of such incidents — and only a handful of which have been proven to be the work of organized hate groups.

Most galling of all, though, to professionals at Jewish organizations is the "pitch" of the Wiesenthal Center letter, which calls for $250,000 to create a Nazi Watch Program. Mendelsohn, the former head of the U.S. Department of Justice unit investigating Nazi war criminals, writes that from his experience he has developed "unique and effective procedures for keeping records of worldwide Nazi activities." In his letter, he writes that the Nazi Watch Program would maintain files of all anti-Semitic literature published in America; learn the names and locations of all neo-Nazis and anti-Semitic leaders in every state; keep careful records of their activities and expose them to the public.

The Anti-Defamation League has been engaged in these activities for more than seven decades and their expertise in monitoring and combatting neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism is acknowledged around the world.

Privately, Anti-Defamation League officials complain that the Wiesenthal Center is not only "re-inventing the wheel" at great cost to well-meaning American Jews but that its approach is to over-dramatize the facts about anti-Semitism in order to raise funds. "They are acting irresponsibly and the results — in terms of frightening people — could be extremely dangerous," said an official of a Jewish research project. But publicly the ADL and other national Jewish agencies who are critical of the Wiesenthal Center's methods, are silent, saying that a public rift would be detrimental to the community as a whole. They are well aware of the fact that the Center is extremely popular among the vast majority of American Jews and that an attack on such an institution would appear to be motivated by jealousy and, perhaps even worse, an attempt to diminish the impact of an organization dealing with the Holocaust.

Asked to respond to the criticism of the direct mail piece, Mendelsohn acknowledged that it was written by a public relations firm but he defended its tone and underlying message, noting that "neo-Nazis may not be a primary problem but they are an unmet problem."

Rabbi Hier said that the Center's direct mailings are "emotional, but they are as factual as possible." He added that "there are enough enemies of the Jewish people to go around. No one group should have exclusive rights to defending the Jewish people." Rabbi Hier justifies the existence of a national Jewish institution like the Wiesenthal Center on the West Coast, asserting: "We shouldn't put all of our eggs in one basket, with everything coming out of New York. The demographics show that Jews are moving away from the East to the Sun Belt and we feel Jews should be represented where they live."

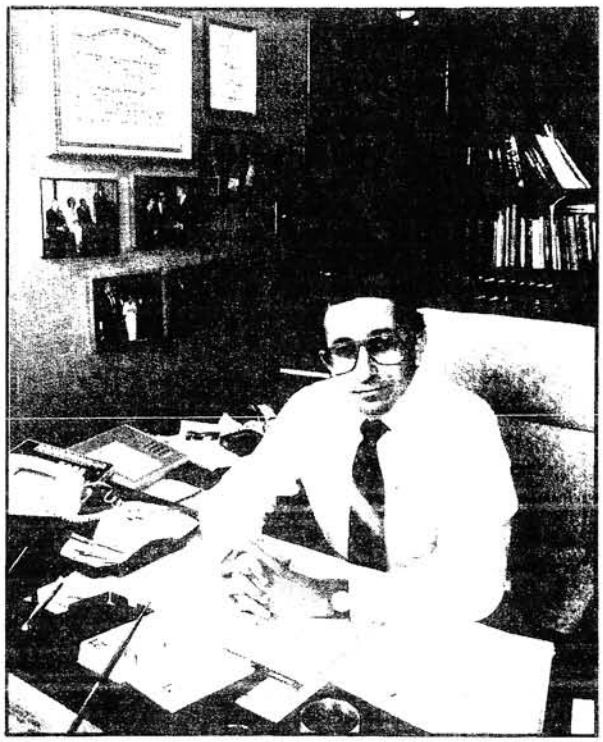
As for the charge that the Wiesenthal Center is duplicating the work of other Jewish defense agencies, Rabbi Hier said that his Center did not want to be in a position of asking other agencies for information. "We don't want to beg, and besides, the difference is not in compiling data but in analyzing it. We have a real difference in approach. The Establishment agencies move slowly and try to keep things quiet. We don't believe in quiet diplomacy. We react quickly and we're not afraid to speak out." He added that it is better for Jews to be protected by three organizations than one or two. "We are responding to a need. That's why we're successful. Believe me, people know how to say 'no' when asked for money. They say 'yes' to us because they like our approach."

That approach — to act quickly and aggressively — is not limited to neo-Nazi causes. The most recent issue of "Social Action Update," the Wiesenthal Center's eight-page publication which claims a circulation of 240,000, contains articles on the Center's involvement in a whole variety of issues and causes, including Ethiopian Jewry, human rights in the USSR and Canada. "It's true that we have evolved from a strictly research institution into much more," said associate dean of the Wiesenthal Center Abraham Cooper. A hard-working, diligent ordained rabbi in his mid-30's, he is Rabbi Hier's right-hand man, having worked with him since the Vancouver days. "We're not in competition with anyone else. We welcome every Jew who wants to do his share."

Together, Rabbis Hier and Cooper travel around the country and the world, meeting with Senators and Administration officials in Washington, with French President Mitterand in Paris, with West German Chancellor Kohl in Berlin, and even with the Pope in Rome. After a Wiesenthal Center delegation had a Papal audience in 1983, Rabbi Hier, who led the group, noted that while they were encouraged by the Pope's message of friendship and trust, "we all felt something was missing. The tragedies of the past were noted and mourned but there was silence about the anti-Semitism and prejudice of today."

If there is an anti-Semitic incident in Europe or the U.S., Rabbi Hier acts swiftly, often holding a press conference to speak out in the strongest possible words against the offense. "We act quickly because we don't have the encumbering bureaucracy that other Jewish organizations have," says Wiesenthal Center counsel Martin Mendelsohn. But a leader of a national Jewish organization countered that "the Wiesenthal Center people are not responsible to anyone, so they can and do shoot from the hip. We feel it's more important to do our homework first."

Sometimes the Center's style is not appreciated by those they defend. In December, 1983, Mexico's Minister of Interior made an anti-Semitic statement and the Wiesenthal Center acted immediately to condemn it. But the leaders of the Mexican Jewish community were upset at "the independent action" taken by the Wiesenthal Center, which they said "can be detrimental in the long run" to Jewish life in Mexico. "We protest against autonomous initiatives," they wrote in a letter to the Center, "without taking into consideration the opinions of the ones involved or without sufficient background data which would ensure that the move does not backfire dramatically."



Rabbi Hier compares Jewish vigilance to baseball: "We've got to be more protective because we've got two strikes against us," he says. "One more strike and we're out."

Rabbi Hier said that when he spoke by phone to the Mexican Jewish leaders shortly after the Minister of Interior's statement, "in English, they were hesitant, but they told us in Yiddish, 'do what you think is best.' And we reject the notion of keeping quiet."

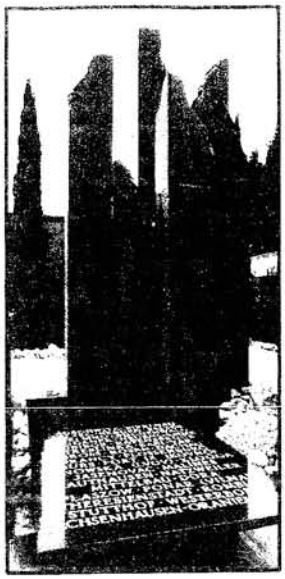
'It Takes Money To Make Money'

Perfecting the art of direct mail fund raising

Clearly, many Jews across the country support the Wiesenthal Center's methods and actions. Typically, a middle-aged businessman from the South explained that he contributes to the Wiesenthal Center because it is action-oriented and bold. "I've never given to Jewish organizations before but this one is different. I received their letter and I like what they stand for. I feel that they're looking out for me."

The Center's direct-mail campaign, with letters of solicitation from Orson Welles, Glenn Ford and others, has been extremely successful. "We started the direct mail campaign in 1979, long before other Jewish organizations," explained Marlene Hier, Rabbi Hier's wife, who handles the direct mail campaign for the Center. "We do this to get members, not to make money," she said, "but we've made money anyway." More than 200,000 people have contributed to the Center — thus qualifying for membership — with the average donation $25.

While a one percent return on mass mailings is considered "break-even," the Wiesenthal Center's response has been between 1.5 and 2 percent. "Each year the professionals tell us it's a fluke and it can't last, but each year our success rate has continued," said Mrs. Hier. Com-



The Wiesenthal Center's Holocaust Memorial Plaza includes six black majestic sculptures, each symbolically shattered at the top, and a marble slab inscribed with the names of concentration camps.

petitors say the Center has the best Jewish direct mail lists in the country.

It is an expensive way to raise funds — buying and renting lists and mailing letters to up to four million families a year. Two years ago, for example, the Center spent $1.6 million on direct mail and renewals, employing the top, Virginia-based public relations firm of Craver, Matthews and Smith.

In all, the Wiesenthal Center raised $5.8 million that year, but it also spent $5.1 million. Which leads observers to ask: what do they do with all of that money?

"It takes a lot of money to make a lot of money," said one Wiesenthal Center official.

Rabbi Hier says that about 16 percent of the overall budget goes for direct mail fund-raising. Experts disagree over whether that figure is a lot to be spending or quite reasonable.

Approximately $700,000 raised was set aside for savings, and again experts disagreed over whether saving about 14¢ per dollar was overly restrained for a non-profit institution.

Taxes are filed jointly by the three divisions of Yeshiva University of Los Angeles, which is comprised of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Yeshiva University and Yeshiva High School. The biggest expense, according to the 1982 tax returns, was for the high school and post-high school yeshiva programs serving 260 students. More than $2.3 million went for those programs.

There are those who resent the Wiesenthal Center because they feel it is a "front" for the high school. Prof. Arnold Band of UCLA, who is Orthodox, feels the Center is diverting funds and attentions away from the need for "a real yeshiva" in Los Angeles on a par with the local Conservative and Reform branches. "I'd like to see a real, viable branch of Yeshiva University out here, one that offers *smicha* (ordination). It should be structured around the Talmud, not the Holocaust. One gets the impression here that the yeshiva sneaks in the back door while the Wiesenthal Center is up front."

Critics say the yeshiva is small and that ironically, its students and faculty are much further to the right in terms of Orthodoxy than Yeshiva University's traditional centrist position. "Rabbi Hier is an avid Zionist but more than a few of the rabbis in his yeshiva are not," says one insider. "He likes to say that he focuses on the Holocaust to get people back to Judaism but he never uses that in his publicity material because it's not sexy enough."

Officials of Yeshiva University in New York have sought to distance themselves and their institution from the Los Angeles school, and Dr. Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University, declined to be interviewed on this subject. Privately, officials of Yeshiva University in New York say they are embarrassed by some of Rabbi Hier's actions and methods but that there is little they can do to control him, expecially since he is so successful at fund raising.

Rabbi Heir emphasized that no monies sent to the Wiesenthal Center are used by YULA. "We keep the funds for the Holocaust Center and the yeshiva totally separate," he said. "No money donated to the Center goes to the yeshiva.

"But I have had success convincing contributors to the Holocaust Center to support our yeshiva, too. I explain to them the connection between Jewish survival and Jewish education. It's like when you get married: at first you think you are just marrying your partner, but gradually you learn to care about your partner's family. Here, too," he continues with a smile, "I tell people I want them to get to know our whole *mishpacha* (family)," referring to the yeshiva as well as the Center.

His success has been formidable. The Belzberg family alone has contributed $1.5 million to YULA in addition to $3 million to the Center's new building complex. Others, on a smaller scale, have started out giving only to the Center and later given to the yeshiva as well.

"These people come to me," said Rabbi Hier, "and say 'where do you need the money most?' and I tell them the yeshiva. It allows the yeshiva to survive."

Other major expenses for the Wiesenthal Center in 1982 included $1.6 million in salaries. Rabbi Hier, at $73,000, was the highest paid employee but Simon Wiesenthal received more than $90,000 in consulting fees. More than $500,000 went for printing and publications, $300,000 for professional fund-raising fees, $250,000 in consultation fees and almost $400,000 for the Center and "Genocide," the film which cost a total of $3 million to produce.

This past year the Center raised more than $2 million through its national direct mail campaign, said Rabbi Hier, with much of that total coming from $5 and $10 donations from all over the country.

"For all that money and all the noise they make, they have little to show for it," says UCLA professor Deborah Lipstadt, voicing the argument heard among scholars and Jewish organizational professionals.

"They have 'Genocide' and their museum," says another academic, "and a lot of p.r. But what have they accomplished in terms of scholarship or research?"

The accusations are most often muffled by anonymity, in part because critics feel "you can't win when you take on a sacred cow," as one put it, and in part because Rabbi Hier has a reputation for "playing hardball." One Los Angeles Jewish community official said Rabbi Hier sought

A Growing Trend

There are about 15 major Holocaust centers across the country now, and that number is certain to increase in the next few years.

According to Isaiah Kuperstein, director of the Holocaust Center of Greater Pittsburgh, it is important to distinguish between full-service major centers and smaller Holocaust committees. He characterized a major center as one that provides full educational services, has a professional staff, ongoing programs, a museum or permanent display and operates year-round. In addition to the two in Los Angeles, such centers now exist in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Miami, Orlando, St. Louis, Dallas, Long Island, Buffalo, Denver and New York City. Detroit's major Holocaust Museum Center opens this week.

Some of those centers are affiliated with their local Jewish federation, and a few are associated with universities.

About 15 other cities, including Baltimore, have Holocaust committees which work on specific programs or projects.

"The more there are, the better," says Kuperstein, "and the strength is the local community. Without local resources, your programs are worthless."

Mark Talisman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council in Washington noted that there is strong interest in many communities to provide permanent Holocaust memorials "and the more there are, the better it will be in terms of education and awareness."

his removal after he once criticized the Wiesenthal Center in print. Several years ago Prof. Lipstadt wrote an article in *Judiasm* in which she cited the "program, publicity, and fund-raising tactics of the Simon Wiesenthal Center" as "partially responsible for accelerating the growth of opposition to Holocaust commemoration." She said Rabbi Hier called her after the article appeared and told her he had just read her "latest joke in *Judaism*" and went on, she said, to verbally attack her for intellectual dishonesty, writing malicious lies and being hired by UCLA to attack the Wiesenthal Center. "Anyone who criticizes them is dismissed as ignorant or institutionally jealous," said Lipstadt.

Some of the strongest criticism of the Wiesenthal Center comes from those most familiar with its operation. Interviews with staff members — past and present — and with Holocaust experts found those who accused Rabbi Hier of "trivializing the Holocaust by exploiting the tragedy to raise funds."

These critics say the Center portrays itself as a serious, scholarly institution but it is not. They maintain that: too little money is set aside for research and scholarship; the resource center is "very limited;" the library is inadequate; there are no archives and no trained Holocaust scholars on the premise.

They add that Rabbi Hier is sensitive to this criticism and in 1983 allowed funds to be used to publish *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust*, a companion volume to the film consisting of 50 comissioned essays by 25 scholars writing on historical, sociological, psychological and theological perspectives of the Holocaust. This year, after a long delay, the Center published the first volume of a planned annual book of scholarly articles on the Holocaust.

Still, even some insiders suggest that the real thrust of the Wiesenthal Center is attracting funds and publicity, that when national interest in the Holocaust seemed to wane the Center "shifted gears" and began focusing more on current anti-Semitism.

It comes down to a question of motives, style and purpose: what does the Wiesenthal Center really stand for? Is the money raised being put to the best possible use? Is the scare-tactic effort used in the heavy-volume direct mail effort justified?

Perhaps the only person who knows the answers to those questions, and others, is Rabbi Hier.

'When You Look Back You Turn To Salt'

"The Holocaust is the centerpiece of a Jew's thinking."

Rabbi Hier

Marvin Hier acknowledges that "the criticism bothers me sometimes, but you have to expect criticism in Jewish life." He attributes most of it to jealousy and suggests that such talk against him only inspires him to re-double his efforts. "If there's something they don't want me to do," he says of his critics, "I'll do it even harder. If someone is told not to give money to us, my reaction is to intensify my efforts to solicit that person."

For the most part, though, Rabbi Hier masks his anger as he patiently defends his work and philosophy:

He asserts that "we don't feel we have to offer anyone any apologies for speaking out on important issues. The Holocaust is the centerpiece of a Jew's thinking and we have created an important Holocaust center.

"We operate on the principle that 60 percent of the world's population was born after the Holocaust and is ignorant of it, so it is our job to recall the past and prevent any re-occurrence in the future."

He says that he felt from the beginning that the ideal site for a Holocaust museum would be a yeshiva because it would offer living proof that Judaism had survived Hitler. "What is the ultimate memorial to the six million? That Torah lives on, that the Jewish people live on," says the rabbi. "Our memorial is against assimilation, it stands for the future destiny of the Jewish people. It's not a cold memorial of bricks and mortar but a place where students carry out God's command to be vigilant against Amalek (the Biblical personification of Israel's enemies). That's the lesson of the Holocaust."

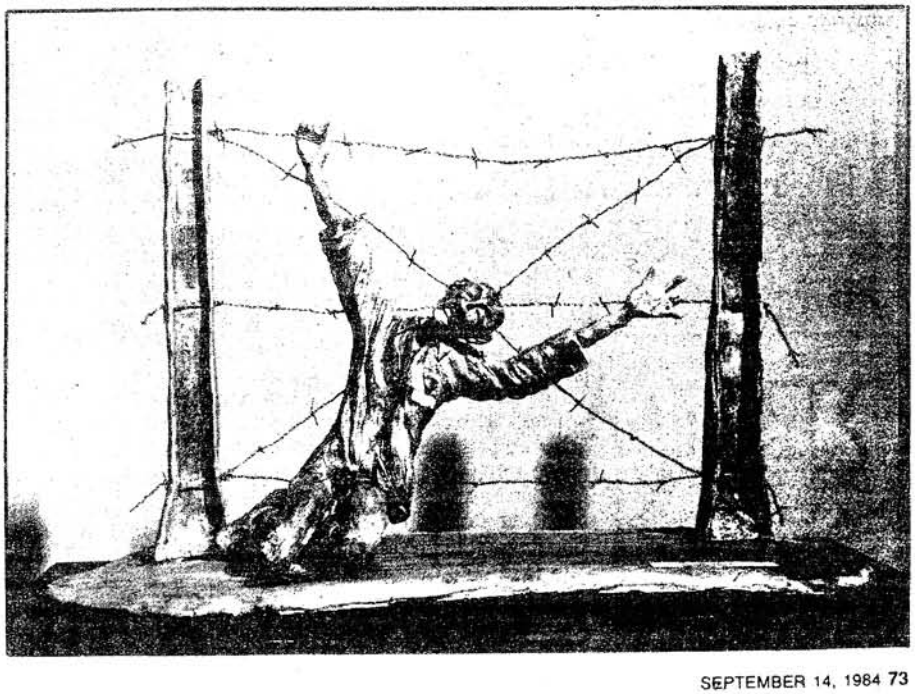
Responding to the argument that he conceived of the Holocaust Center as a means of attracting wide-scale support for his yeshiva, he says: "You have to bring a person to his Jewish feelings through what he cares about. The Holocaust is a tragedy most Jews can relate to, while keeping kosher or observing Shabos is alien to so many.

"We believe in using the medium of this generation," he says. " I'm a great believer in using the media as a tool. We have a weekly radio program of news and features called 'Page One' that is broadcast in cities all around the country. We were successful in teaching the history and the lessons of the Holocaust in a dramatic way through multi-media with the 'Genocide' film, and we're now working on a new film about the creation of the State of Israel. We're in Los Angeles and we want to take advantage of our locale — the many talented people in radio, television and film.

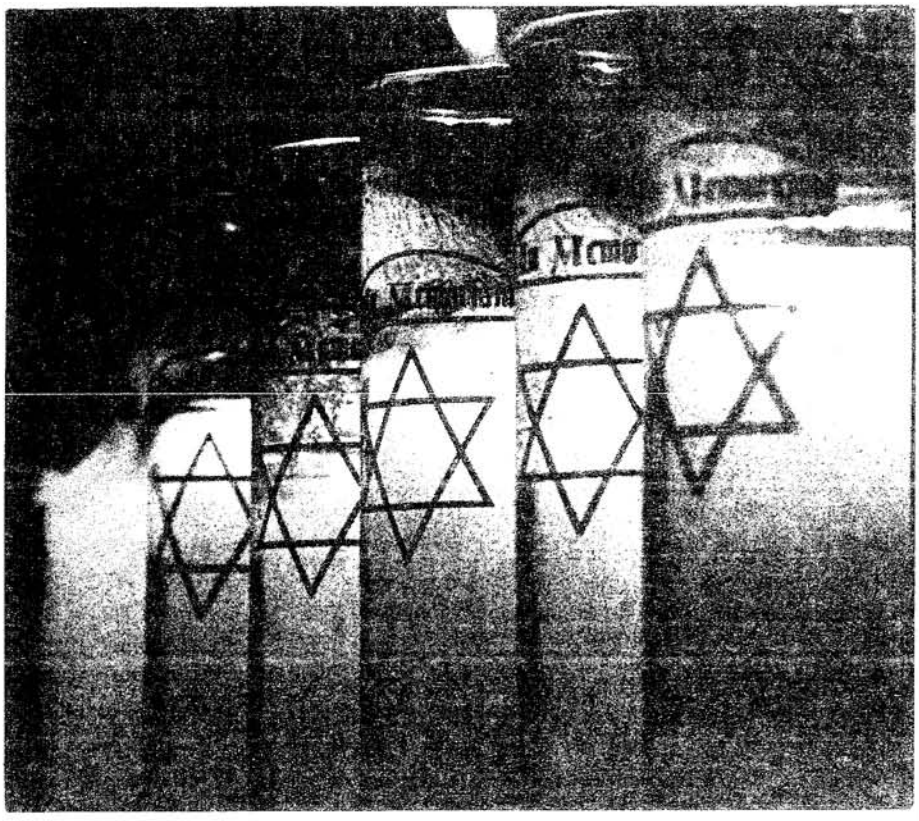
"But we can't be a serious institution unless we have a serious commitment to scholarship and education. We've published two books (the 'Genocide' essays and the Holocaust studies annual) and we're doing an educational film on Raoul Wallenberg.

"Look, there will always be criticism that we're not doing enough. But look what we've done in seven years! People point to how much 'Genocide' cost to produce, but that's a cheap price to pay to bring our message to people all over America and across the world.

"The people who say we shouldn't use show business



This dramatic sculpture in the Wiesenthal Center Museum depicts the suffering of the Nazi victims.



Is the Wiesenthal Center "constantly burying Hitler," as one prominent Orthodox rabbi in Los Angeles complains, or keeping the memory alive to prevent another Holocaust

personalities are the same ones who invite politicians as guest speakers at their dinners. Do they bring dignity and Elizabeth Taylor and Orson Welles don't? Why not communicate our message with the most effective means? A criticism is only valid if the critics don't do the same thing themselves. We do what we think is right. When you look back, you turn to salt.

"The worst charge against us is that we are alarmists and over-react to anti-Semitism. But which is the worst sin: to over-react or under-react? To me, it's like a baseball game. Did you ever notice how a batter stands when he has two strikes on him? He digs in a little deeper. He holds his hands higher on the bat. His whole approach is different — he's got to be more protective because he knows that one more strike and he's out.

"I believe that we Jews are at a point in time where we stand in with two strikes against us, having suffered through pogroms and the Holocaust this century. We Jews are down to our last strike, and I say we must take a very careful look at what's coming our way or we'll strike out.

"We say it can happen again, anywhere. The worst that we can be accused of for being ever-watchful is that we're paranoid. But if we don't keep up our watch, the price we may pay would be much higher.

"We're fulfilling Simon Wiesenthal's mandate to speak out and take action and we'll continue to do our work, to grow and expand. We're undertaking a major expansion, a $30 million campaign because our achievements have exceeded our dream. We see ourselves as an Orthodox institution not happy with the image that Orthodox institutions must be limited to narrow religious issues. We're not like that. We operate on every front. We will speak up whenever and wherever Jews are put on the defensive. Our goal is to work for *Am Yisrael* (the people of Israel) and be involved in all issues affecting Jews. We couldn't be doing all that we are doing if people didn't feel our work was important. The people support us. That's the proof."

And what does Simon Wiesenthal have to say about all of this — the praise, the criticism, the controversy? Since he lives and works in Vienna (though he keeps in touch with Rabbi Hier through frequent phone calls), he is able to stay above the fray, taking credit for what he is proud of and shrugging off any criticism as the work of the Center officials in Los Angeles.

During an interview with Wiesenthal, who was in the U.S. for a speaking tour, he defended the work of the Center as essential. "I don't just talk about the past, I talk about the consequences and look to the future. And that is how Rabbi Hier works, also."

He laughed when told that Rabbi Hier is criticized for his methods. "He knows how to make publicity," said Wiesenthal. "We needed $3 million for the film 'Genocide,' a very important film. How can you get $3 million without publicity, I ask you?" He said the Center is "for Hollywood," and it is proper to make use of entertainment figures to further the Center's goals.

"We have done in Los Angeles what has never been done before. The museum is only a help, but the main purpose is to be action-oriented."

As for criticism that the Wiesenthal Center exaggerates the degree of Anti-Semitism in America, he responded: "It can happen in every country, believe me."

'Where Can You Go From There?'

One former staffer of the Wiesenthal Center says he used to complain, in vain, about the tone of the Center's direct mail letters which, he said, "make it seem like the next Holocaust is right around the corner." He argued that not only was this inaccurate but, "from a practical standpoint, where can you go from there?" The answer he was given, he said, is that "it works."

And it does work. The Wiesenthal Center is, by any criterion of organizational standards — size of membership, funding, visibility — an incredible success.

But should the Holocaust remain, 40 years later, the centerpiece of Jewish experience? Rabbis and others tell us we should be motivated by joy rather than fear, by commitment rather than paranoia. They say such preoccupation with the anti-Semitism of the present and the past creates a climate of depression, isolation and mistrust — and renders virtually all other issues inconsequential by comparison.

The success of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, though, tells us otherwise. For while scholars, statistics and sermons may point towards a more positive Judaism, the phenomenal growth of the Wiesenthal Center suggests that the haunting memory of the Holocaust is, for better or worse, what makes millions of Jews feel like Jews.

This places a special responsibility on Rabbi Hier and his staff. Having awakened a spark of Jewish consciousness in so many people, the Wiesenthal Center seeks to bring its new supporters from fear to faith. The question, then, is not whether the Center has "used" the Holocaust, but how. Not whether the Holocaust can happen again, but how best to ensure that it doesn't.

If, as one prominent Orthodox rabbi in Los Angeles complains, the Center is "constantly burying Hitler," there can be little hope for the future. If, however, as Rabbi Hier maintains, the Center is keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive to prevent its recurrence, it will fulfill its mandate — to transform the ashes of tragedy into the fire of commitment. ✱